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## Possibilities for Paradigm Change: Beliefs and Attitudes of Australian Academic Information Systems Leaders

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### Abstract

*This paper focuses on the Australian academic information systems field from a critical perspective. It reports on research that explores the possibility of a paradigm change within the Australian academic information systems field. Fourteen leaders of the academic information systems field in Australia were interviewed about their beliefs and attitudes regarding the field's stakeholders, their needs, and alternative paradigm possibilities for the field. Most leaders believe systemic change is needed, but unlikely to happen. Questions of the future of the academic information systems field are addressed. The paper aims to promote interest, further investigation and discourse about the role of the academic information systems field in Australian tertiary institutions and society.*

### Keywords

Information systems, domain, critical theory, paradigm change.

### INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the academic information systems (IS) field from a critical perspective. It aims to contribute to discourse on the domain and purpose of the field in Australian tertiary institutions and society. The paper offers critical comment on aspects of the state of the field and explores the possibility of a paradigm change within the Australian academic information systems field to serve better the interests of all its stakeholders.

The academic information systems field places itself at the centre of technology take-up and systems development, yet there appears to be almost no discourse on the effects of information and communications technologies and systems on individuals or society (removed for refereeing). By privileging business and training “capitalism’s foot soldiers” (Ehrensall 2001) the field’s educational programs appear to be anti-democratic. Curriculum choice is value-laden. It would seem reasonable then, that at least some discourse should be evident as academics theorise and consider the character of their agency. Such papers are quite rare in the field’s literature. This paper aims to contribute to that discourse.

The research also makes a contribution to understanding the sources of curricula in higher education. This has received little systematic attention by researchers (Barnett 2000). Clark (1983) locates universities within a triangle of forces: state authority, “the markets” and academe itself. Barnett (2000) suggests that this approach indicates curricula should be situated amid a wide social and global context. Barnett describes a supercomplex world in which “the very frameworks by which we orient ourselves to the world are themselves contested” (Barnett 2000, p. 257). It is a world that is “fragile” in that it is being constantly subjected to social and technological change, constantly challenging our understandings of the world and ourselves, and the ways in which we act in the world. It is this world for which higher education institutions must prepare its students by accepting responsibility for broadening the curriculum so that it is responsive to the needs of human society in this supercomplex age (Barnett 2000).

This paper reports on research into beliefs and attitudes of the field’s leaders to alternative paradigm possibilities for the IS field.

A brief explanation of the critical theories that inform this research is given, followed by a very brief sketch of the academic information systems field. The substantive research report then follows.

## CRITICAL THEORY AND RESEARCH

This research reported in this paper has an emancipatory intent. It reports part of a critical enquiry into the activities of an academic field in the manner of the social critique of Marcuse (1969; 1978/1941). It also draws on the *autaton conformity* of Fromm (1941), and is further informed by the *hegemony* of Gramsci (1971, 1985, 1994, 1995). The research also draws on particular critical educational theories: Bourdieu's (1990) *symbolic violence*, the *hidden curriculum* of Jackson (1968) and *resistance theory* (Giroux 1983).

Critical research is distinctly different from other categories of research. Critical theory is an extensive intellectual body of work that mounts a sustained socio-political critique with an emancipatory intent. Critical research is grounded in a particular policy analysis: as well as criticising current society, it is aimed at providing people with knowledge and understanding to help them help themselves overcome oppression and achieve happiness in a less-alienated, more democratic world. Critical research is necessarily subjective. It rests on a morality that informs the researcher and guides the construction of research questions and selection of phenomena to understand, as well as the ways in which the phenomena may be understood (Brookfield 2005).

From the 1940s Marcuse's writings focused on freedom, the individual and technical rationality. Marcuse investigates the fetishisation of technology and the dimensions of technical reason available to those with power for repressive and ideological purposes. "Technology concentrates power ... [and] ... individualistic rationality [is] transformed into technological rationality" (Marcuse in Arato and Gebhardt 1978, p. 141). Individuals are stripped of their liberty by the very rationality in which they live (Marcuse 1978/1941). Marcuse observed: Technology serves to institute new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion ... (Marcuse 1964, p. xv).

The information systems field, with its positivist, apolitical logic of processes is a creation of a post-World War II information revolution that is part of a larger political process of scientific modernism. Marcuse's focus on "technical rationality" as a tool of domination in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) is a useful construct for understanding how discourses of information technology are used to perpetuate modernist notions of information and capitalist logics of consumption. The logic of instrumental rationality and technological rationality is normalised politically, economically, and socially.

Gramsci (1971, 1985, 1994, 1995) sought to understand structural factors within society. Gramsci is most well-known for his work on *hegemony*, a term often incorrectly attributed to him. Ideological hegemony in capitalist societies refers to the ruling class maintaining its power through the creation and perpetuation of belief systems which stress the institutions of law and order, authority and discipline that they have themselves created to control the working classes. Social structures, the home, schools, universities and work places are all sites of hegemony where individuals learn and embrace normalised beliefs and political conditions that work against their own interests and serve the interests of privileged, powerful élites. Citizens accept unjust social order as preordained and a part of normal culture. Hegemony pervades social institutions, such as schools and institutions of higher learning. Hegemony in this context is a well-researched phenomenon with agents' actions referred to as "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). As education passes from government to corporate hands in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, understanding hegemonic agency is more relevant than ever.

Fromm saw a direct link between a healthy society free from capitalist oppression and alienation and a strong system of adult education. Fromm viewed the distinguishing character of capitalism as the elevation above all else of the economic domain of life. Its leitmotif is the use of people as if they were economic objects (Fromm 1956). The education system "generally tries to train people to have knowledge as a possession" (Fromm 1976, p. 48). Educational institutions "give each student ... a luxury-knowledge package" with "the size of each package being in accord with the person's probably [sic] social prestige" and reduce teachers to "bureaucratic dispensers of knowledge" thus completing the commodification of education (Fromm 1968, p. 120).

Fromm (1941) describes a phenomenon he calls *autaton conformity*, a process that works to erase freedom of thought, speech and action. We become "automatons who live under the illusion of being self-willing individuals ... everybody and everything has become instrumentalised" (1941, p. 279). What passes for education destroys our capacity for critical thinking. We are unable to see the big picture, unable to ask critical questions; we see life as "composed of many little pieces, each separate from the other and lacking any sense as a whole" (Fromm 1941, p. 277). Fromm advocates teaching a structuralised worldview that requires a familiarity with history, political economy and sociology. Education should assist adults to see the big picture and see their lives resulting from circumstances, the intersection of political, social and economic positions and the workings of capital.

*Symbolic violence* (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990) is the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning upon groups or classes in such a way as they are experienced as legitimate" (Jenkins 1992, p. 104). Ehrensall (2001) argues that all tertiary business and management education is a form of symbolic violence. Jackson (1968)

coined the term *hidden curriculum* to describe the aspects of classroom life that socialised students into normative behaviours. “[A] fundamental problem facing us is the way in which systems of domination and exploitation persist and reproduce themselves without being consciously recognized by the people involved” (Apple 1982, p. 13). Giroux (1983) reasserts the fundamental political nature of teaching and the importance of linking pedagogy to social change. Giroux (1999) argues that educators have never been neutral: their work has always been political and politicised. Rigour in education means being connected to social relevance (Giroux 1999). “At universities the hidden curriculum must be brought to an overt level, it must be thought about, it must be talked through” (Apple in Gair and Mullins 2001, p. 37). Little has been written about hidden curricula in the higher education system and very few studies made (Margolis *et al.* 2001). Business schools in tertiary institutions have been the subject of criticism for offering training for a working life of serving capitalists under the guise of education (Ehrensals 1999; Ehrensals 2001; Tinker 2004).

## THE ACADEMIC INFORMATION SYSTEMS FIELD

From its beginnings in the 1960s, the academic field of information systems has grown as the computer systems support of management has become ever-more extensive.

The 1980s’ rise of neoliberalism caused business to face ever-increasing competition as a result of deregulation and globalization. As the business world experimented with new competitive strategies and systems, the academic information systems field followed, documenting its successes and failures and developing new teaching programs to provide a stream of technicians for industry (Sy and Tinker 2010). Despite meeting these business needs, the opposing views of the field resulted in the field being marginalised within tertiary institutions (Lyytinen and King 2004).

Throughout its brief history the fortunes of the academic information systems field have fluctuated with the demand for its graduates. The academic field has been the subject of many intense internal debates about its purpose, its research domain, its research methods and its relevance. The domain debate polarises those who would broaden the field to include social issues and those who would return to a technological core. Business’ use of technologies for profit creation without social concern can raise moral and ethical issues about continuing to normalise the primacy of the field’s traditional stakeholders through their research and teaching (Sy and Tinker 2010). The disjuncture between The Market and The Public Good becomes apparent when analysing the political and social effects of information and communications technologies “IS requires a literature that takes as problematic this irreducible antagonism between ‘the social’ and the Market” (Sy and Tinker 2010, p. 24). Remenyi “would like to see more effort being used [to] produce a richer life for more people rather than simply a focus on efficient corporate activity” (2002, p. 3).

The field has had to cope with political and structural change that has had profound effects on the universities within which the academy resides. Neoliberal policies now drive educational policy and practice in Australia. Many have expressed concern for education within neoliberal political economies (Robinson 1996; McLaren 1999; Pocock 2003; Pusey 2003; Dixon *et al.* 2004; Apple 2006; Klein 2007; Western *et al.* 2007; Braun 2009; Fear and Denniss 2009). It is no longer clear what a university is nor what its place in society ought to be (Pick 2004). The President of Harvard University, Drew Gilpin Faust, asks, “Have universities become too captive to the immediate and worldly purposes they serve? Has the market model become the fundamental and defining identity of higher education?” (Faust 2009, p. BR19)

## THE RESEARCH

The research focuses on the leaders of the academic information systems field in Australia. It is constituted as a series of interviews with leading information systems academics in Australia, and is informed by the works of the critical theorists presented earlier.

### Research method

The research was guided by, and is consistent with, the qualitative approach advocated by Kvale (1996). A full report on the research method is available (Falconer 2010). Fourteen Australian professors of information systems were selected as a convenience sample. Face-to-face interviews were conducted, guided by an interview schedule of 20 questions informed by critical theories. The interviewees were assured of anonymity. Pilot interviews were conducted. The research had ethics approval. Each question was put to the interviewee with no further prompting or discussion. The conduct of the interviews and willingness of the respondents attests to the validity of the responses. The interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were not returned to the interviewees for verification as unprompted and unedited responses were required. The main analysis method was condensation of meaning. The researcher attempted to

understand the responses from the perspective of the interviewee as well as understand the texts from the critical perspective of the research project. Responses to a segment of the interview schedule are reported in the following sections.

## **BELIEFS ABOUT THE FIELD**

The interviews began with four questions about the interviewees' beliefs about the academic IS field's stakeholders.

The academic leaders were first asked who they see as the stakeholders of the information systems field. A clear majority identified the academics themselves as the main stakeholders.

The first stakeholder that comes to my mind is the academic

was typical of comments made. Academics were identified as being primarily motivated by their need to maintain their employment. Students were the next clearly identified group of stakeholders. Then the expected responses of business / management / employers / practitioners were well-represented.

Society as a stakeholder was usually mentioned as somewhat of an afterthought. There was some recognition that the field should be beginning to recognise society as a stakeholder as much technology development in recent years is changing social behaviour. Such views were, however, nearly always qualified by restating the need for the field to support management. There was general recognition that there are a wide range of stakeholders who "have been relatively untouched by research in ICTs."

The second question asked the interviewees whether they believed the academic information systems field meets the needs of all of its stakeholders. Typical responses were:

Oh no, no, no I'd say not.

The short answer to that is no.

Responses were offered in terms of the needs of academics, doing research, meeting industry needs, meeting students' needs, the structures of the academic field itself, resources, teaching and social responsibility. The field was generally seen as not serving the interests of academics, students or industry well. The field was understood as being too small to offer much opportunity for career advancement for academics, great difficulty in obtaining research funding and was seen to be failing within the university sector. Several respondents claimed that academics focus too much on publishing in leading journals, described by one as being trapped in a self-referential system.

On the other hand, some interviewees were satisfied that the needs of students were being met, in that graduates were able to obtain employment reasonably soon after graduation. Teaching was mentioned directly by only two respondents. It was noted that the field is diverse in Australia and that different institutions have developed their programs in different ways, presumably in response to local demand. Although graduates obtain employment, there was concern that they lack qualities and knowledge that employers want graduates to possess. A lack of resources was understood to constrain all aspects of academic activities. There are insufficient funds, staff and time to do the job properly.

Wider social needs were recognised by few respondents.

The third question asked the interviewees what the next generation of Australians needs from the academic information systems field. This question surprised a number of interviewees; most had not considered the field from this perspective. Schools and departments use industry advisory groups, but that appears to be generally the extent of their enquiry into stakeholder needs. After some consideration the response from most was: relevance! The field needs to do more relevant research. The field needs more engagement with stakeholders to ensure that research "might actually help them with their problems." Another claimed that:

there are real doubts as to whether what we're doing is of benefit and therefore [that we] should exist and therefore we should be worried about [the field's] continual existence.

Another believed that the field should "rediscover the virtue of relevance." A coherent, in-depth, sophisticated, up-with-the-times body of knowledge was considered by another to be what is necessary.

Some respondents believe critical reflection is necessary if the field is not to become irrelevant.

We are not thinking enough [about] what are the needs of the people out there in the society that we should fulfil. We are not asking ourselves what are the implications of the research that we are doing. We have to press for critical reflection to be a part of what we do and how we do it.

A major theme of the respondents was creative problem solving and managing in the modern world — a world in which vast amounts of information must be dealt with. There is a need to help people make sense of this information. Society needs to be educated about how information is used politically, not just representationally. Members of society need an understanding of how information systems might enable or empower or disadvantage their lives. Students need to become genuine creative problem solvers, not just the producers of standard business models. Wide social perspectives were offered: how to use information systems to improve the human condition.

Several responses were in terms of “fixing the field”: removing internal discipline boundaries, identifying where the information systems field fits with other disciplines. Re-positioning the field was seen by some as necessary to meet modern Australia’s needs.

The responses can be summarised as recognising that the field needs to be relevant, teach practical skills and engage in education that prepares the next generation for living and working in a world defined by the information revolution. Respondents recognise the academic field is not well-developed or prepared to meet this need. It was notable that, as the interview progressed, many respondents identified a role for the academic information systems field that goes far beyond supporting business. A role of addressing wider social needs was clearly identified.

The fourth and last question in this section asked the leaders if the academic information systems field is delivering what the next generation of Australian needs from the field.

Responses ranged from “I think by and large it is” to “No, we’re bloody hopeless.” Three interviewees believe that, on balance, the field is serving the needs of stakeholders, but that it could do better. One suggested that there are pockets of good research in Australia and that several expatriate Australians are producing good research overseas. One believes that the field has to strike a balance between helping Australia versus generating new knowledge. These were implied to be mutually exclusive. This respondent believes the field should move away from developing a focus on society and refocus on a core of supporting business.

Most respondents strongly expressed their beliefs that the field is not doing well. Views were expressed that the field has not achieved much in Australia and has not made much contribution to Australian society. The field must face the challenge that it is still operating in an old way of thinking about information systems. One respondent expressed a view that the field does not have a good idea about what preparing students for a life of information systems work might mean. Another understands the failure to deliver for its stakeholders to be a world-wide problem, not just Australian.

Some responses have a sense of a field that is working hard, doing what it can in a very difficult environment. However, most of the responses were phrased in negative terms. The field is seen as failing to deliver to the Australian populace. Most responses dealt at length with perceived barriers to achievement. Lack of support within universities, student demands for simplistic courses, and the demands of publication and editorial policies of journals and conferences were all identified as significant barriers to serving Australia. The student body is understood as problematical: students find an information systems education that doesn’t give them answers, but provides them with challenging scenarios for which there isn’t an established answer, very unsatisfactory. Students expect to be taught how to do things, not how to think.

Following this opening set of questions, the interviewees were asked a range of questions related to ideas of values. Later in the interview, they were asked questions about social issues and the academic information systems field. The remainder of this paper reports on some of those questions.

## **ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIAL ISSUES**

Should the academic information systems field engage with social issues of ICTs? This was the first question addressing this topic put to the academic leaders. This question was purposely framed broadly to lead the respondents into considerations of matters surrounding this issue. Later in the interview, more-focused questions were put.

Thirteen of the 14 interviewees believe the academic information systems field should engage with these issues, but one respondent was strongly of the belief that it would be a mistake for the field to so engage and pointed out that a minority of the field was said to be concerned that the field has become too diffuse and that it should be defined more narrowly. For this respondent, research is too far removed from the “IT artefact.” If the field does not define itself more narrowly its separate existence becomes threatened and the field is at risk of disappearing. The view was expressed by this respondent that a substantial portion of the information systems community believes this is currently happening.

The opposite view was expressed by the other 13 respondents, however usually with various qualifications. Several expressed an unqualified agreement that the field should engage with the issues raised. The information systems field was said to be broad enough to accommodate the issues:

One of its beauties [and] also one of its problems is that it is very broad. IS is used in every sort of industry and every part of life and so whether we like it or not I think we are committed to doing that.

Another offered the view that the academic information systems field had conceded the areas of concern to the emergent field of informatics, however it is believed that they should be recognised as legitimate areas of the academic information systems field.

Another sees the field as having “put itself in a little pocket” because it “treats itself as purely concerned with what happens inside organisations to support management.”

Several offered the view that the domain of the field needs to be widened. One put this point of view nicely: “We have got to be concerned not just with applications of IT, but implications of IT.” Widening the field was also seen as a question of relevance.

One interviewee believes in an economic or Darwinian approach. Scholars have to craft their rhetoric in a way others find compelling and, if successful, their research will begin to permeate the information systems literature.

One interviewee believes the areas addressed by the question are worthwhile and relevant to the field, but are policed out by journal editorial policies.

Several interviewees see the situation more positively. Comments by these interviewees suggest individual initiatives are creating pockets of research and teaching activity. These efforts are understood to be constrained by institutional requirements which militate against such initiatives, and by demands on academics to publish. One interviewee described a situation where one or two inspired lecturers create “more proactive education” which attempts to encourage students to become socially aware after graduation. The efforts are very individual and are thought probably to cause discomfort to students.

Following the broad, introductory question, several more-specific questions were asked. Two of these questions related to actual activities are briefly reported here.

## **Research into the social effects of ICTs**

Twelve interviewees reported that their school or group undertake research into the social effects of information and communications technologies. Two schools have a strong commitment to research into related topics: community networks, ICTs and social inclusion, and ICTs and remote communities. One of these has a growing research commitment to IT-enabled society, health, ageing, and the community. A third focuses on research into social media, democracy, social networking and critical research on information technologies, systems and the workplace. The remainder report that in their schools, research on such topics is dependent on individual interest and initiative.

## **The teaching of the social effects of ICTs**

The social effects of information and communications technologies do not form a substantial part of teaching in any of the respondents’ institutions. Half the interviewees indicated that in their institutions information systems academics do not address the topic at all. The remainder indicated that there is a small presence in the programs, mostly limited to part of one course or a single course at postgraduate level.

Most indicated that the inclusion of the study of the social effects of information and communications technologies and systems is not encouraged in institutions. The field and the institutions must attract students to survive. Studying social aspects of technologies is believed to be unattractive to students who do not see a nexus between that and getting a job.

## **Discussion**

Almost all the interviewees expressed a view that the field should engage with issues related to the effects of information and communications technologies and systems on individuals and society. There is widespread interest in the issues and most believe they do or should form part of the domain of the information systems field, however, there is a minority view that the field’s domain is currently too wide and must be narrowed to focus on a core of information technology issues in order to secure its survival.



The responses show a clear difference between the level of research engagement with these topics and the level of teaching engagement. Several schools make a real effort to engage with some of the issues and most report that there is at least some research in their schools that addresses a limited range of social issues. Nonetheless, although these issues have penetrated the consciousness of the field and engage researchers, there is very little penetration of the curriculum. Teaching is totally constrained by the need to attract students. Social issues of technologies and systems are believed to render programs unattractive to students. Teaching programs that include such topics are therefore rarely supported by the institutions.

The responses of the leaders of the field in Australia show that the domain of the field is still contested. Further problems arise from the beliefs and actions of a majority of the leaders that the field should undertake research into social issues arising from information technologies but cannot include such topics in their teaching programs owing to institutional requirements to offer courses attractive to students, coupled with the fact that students are not attracted to courses with social content. Students learn of an information systems field that is defined by their willingness to enrol in courses. A narrow, technical presentation is attractive to students. A more socially-informed program discourages them. Away from teaching, many academics work to create a different field from that which is presented to students. This is a problem that needs serious debate within the field and institutions.

## **VALUES AND THE ACADEMIC IS FIELD**

Late in the interview, respondents were asked about the values that should underpin the development and activities of the academic information systems field. The leaders are almost unanimous in their beliefs that the academic information systems field should embrace non-market values based on concepts such as social justice, environmentalism, sustainability and equity. One mused: "I wonder who would say no to that?"

One suggested there is room within the information systems field to accommodate such issues, but that "we all wouldn't do it ... but there's certainly room for some." Another stated that there is room to work in social and business areas. One interviewee sees the question as one of corporate and non-corporate values.

Comments were offered about a need to "see a bigger picture" and to incorporate long-term and broader issues. Sustainability is seen as an issue that is important for the field to address. Another used the increasingly common term "green IT." One respondent commented that "we are starting to try". Another suggested "we should ... but we haven't the confidence."

## **Values and IS curriculum**

Interviewees were then asked to consider whether market forces should be the sole influence on IS curriculum.

Market forces are understood by most respondents as focusing on short-term teaching objectives. Meeting current business needs by imparting performative skills to undergraduates is understood as the overarching short-term objective demanded by student markets and business advisory panels. Balancing this short-term imperative with longer-term objectives is understood as the responsibility of academics. Two interviewees espoused views quite different from those set out above, and from each other. One respondent believes market forces should be the sole arbiter of curriculum content. The market is amoral and pure. Everyone is free to offer whatever they wish and the market will respond. Some offerings may be more attractive to students than others and the competitive mechanisms of the market will indicate to academics what they should offer. Academics who make deliberate efforts to include other materials that are not demanded by the market may themselves create injustices by imposing their views of the world on others.

On the other hand, academics' knowledge of the market was challenged by another respondent:

Do we know what market demand is? I don't think so. What is the basis of our judgement of what the market demand is? Maybe it's something totally different from what we believe it is. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy. We believe that it is, then we develop programs and then refine what we believe it is. Instead of being ahead of the game we are at best responding to the past.

## **Discussion**

Throughout their responses, almost all respondents referred to the "rigour versus relevance" debate that has been on-going for some years in the academic information systems field. There is strong support among the respondents for the proposition that the field would be more relevant if it were reconstituted to serve all society, not just business. The field would be more relevant to the real world:

We're rigorous, but not very relevant, that's why the field has died.

Another offered that:

We are ... superficially relevant, meaning relevant to managers. [Instead] we would become truly relevant.

Another suggested the field has “missed the boat, the more interesting research is being done outside the field.”

Several suggested that a transformation to a more socially-aware field would not be good for industry. The field would quickly be told by industry to get back to supporting industry.

The question of market demand and the place of the field in tertiary institutions is considered to be an issue for the field if it seriously embraces society as a stakeholder. Several interviewees commented that demand for courses offered by the information systems academics would diminish, with the likely consequence of further reductions of staff and possible removal of the field from tertiary institutions. Integration of social issues is seen as problematical. Specialist courses or programs could be offered that would not threaten current industry-focused offerings.

The final question put to the leaders asked them for their views about the future of the academic IS field. The next section reports their responses.

## **THE FUTURE OF THE ACADEMIC INFORMATION SYSTEMS FIELD**

The interviewees expressed a range of views about the future of the academic information systems field. Some responded with comments about what they would like to see happen, others about what they believe may happen, others why nothing will happen.

One group may be described as adherents to Tom Peters’ (1984) maxim “stick to the knitting.” The field should do what it always set out to do: use computers to solve problems. The field has a core; if it redefines itself every couple of years it isn’t a discipline. The field should keep doing what it has always done and be allowed to evolve. Notwithstanding that evolution brings visions of new stakeholders, the focus remains data and information: how to manage that information, how to interact with it, how to use it is the future of the field.

A majority of interviewees believe change is necessary, but most consider it unlikely to happen. One suggested that in times of pressure, such as the field is currently experiencing, people “go back to what they know rather than being brave and going with the things that obviously are going to be the future.” Another believes the best that can be hoped for is that the field produces better business graduates.

Several were more optimistic. One believes Australia should demonstrate to the world that the field has to take a broad view by focusing on all the issues raised in the interviews. Another wants the field to broaden its course offerings by targeting areas such as health, architecture, the arts and so forth. Yet another suggested the business focus could be the preserve of undergraduate programs and a broader view embraced for postgraduate studies.

Others referred to the universities. The developed world has for some time been undergoing an information revolution, but university managements seem unwilling for academics to engage seriously with it: “We’ve got this wonderful period that we’re going through in history and universities can’t see it”.

Several respondents wonder whether the field has a future. The field is seen as breaking up as groups re-badge themselves to seek new student markets and re-align with other disciplines and groups. There is a very real threat to the information systems community nationally and internationally.

Several see a need for the field to be more critical. A critical stance would benefit organisations and the rest of society. On this view, performativity and the needs of society need not be mutually exclusive.

Several responses gave the interviewer a sense that some believe change may have to await the next generation of academic leaders:

Maybe once my generation of academics disappears we might eventually find our way — it’s a very hopeful, hopeful thought.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In 2010 an extensive critical enquiry into the academic IS field was conducted. The enquiry had an emancipatory intent. As part of the research, fourteen leaders of the Australian academic IS field were interviewed. This paper reports briefly on part of that enquiry and contributes to discourse on the nature of the academic IS field, possibilities for specific change and visions for its future.

Although the academic information systems field traditionally is focused on organisational needs, all interviewees recognise society's claim as a stakeholder in the field, and that society is not well served by the field. Social effects of technologies are of concern to all leaders interviewed. All agree that social issues of technologies are relevant and important to humanity. There is strong support for the proposition that the field would be more relevant if it were constituted to serve wider society. Barriers to change, however, were often mentioned; the major being the concern for a loss of relevance to business which would be reflected in a downturn in demand for IS courses by students. That the field is so shaped by the demands of students should be of concern to all academics, institutions and society at large. Academics themselves are also seen as barriers, interviewees believe most display little interest in taking on research into or teaching about social issues related to information systems.

Most interviewees show strong support in principle for the ideals of a more socially-inclusive field domain, but are less supportive or enthusiastic for acting on those ideals. Dissenting views were expressed by a small minority who believe the field should focus on a technical core or evolve purely in response to market tastes and demands.

The conditions faced by the academic information systems in Australia fit the observations of Barnett (2000), who hypothesises that higher education curricula generally are exhibiting a performativity slide, partly as a result of the "massification" of higher education. On this view, mass education acts through instrumental and technical reason, rather than reflective and communicative reason (Barnett 2000). Curricula reflect the dominant sources of influences which, in the modern university, is the world of work (Barnett 2000). The academic information systems field in Australia may be understood as, to a large extent, defined by what it teaches, not by what it researches.

This research reveals most leaders believe systemic change is necessary but unlikely. Almost all academics believe the field should embrace society as a stakeholder. However, there is not the institutional support, the leadership resolution, nor sufficient numbers of knowledgeable and willing academics to effect paradigmatic change. Any form of concerted action was seen as unlikely at the time of conducting this research; apart from individual efforts by a few interested and willing academics, the focus of the field will remain primarily that of serving business.

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